DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 862 SP 024 289

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TITLE The United States and Great Britain: Responses to the 1980 Boycott of the Olympic Games.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (Anaheim, CA, March 29-April 2, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Activism; *Athletics; Conflict; Foreign Countries; *International Cooperation; International Relations; *Majority Attitudes; *Political Attitudes; *Political Issues
IDENTIFIERS Boycotts; *Great Britain; Olympic Games; *Olympic Games Boycott (1980); United States

ABSTRACT

There have been several ways in which sport has been used as a mechanism of public diplomacy. First, the sporting arena provides a setting in which a country can define its aspirations for status or prestige among nations. Second, the nature of competition between countries reflects current diplomatic agreements. Third, the most familiar role of sport in the international scene is that of a political instrument for ideological expression or propagandizing. Fourth, international sport is viewed as a way to further international understanding and peace. Fifth, contrary to the above, athletic competition can be a mechanism to demonstrate protest and/or conflict. The 1980 Olympic Boycott was used to dramatize dissatisfaction with a Soviet strategy in Afghanistan. This paper provides a detailed and documented interpretation of the British and United States reactions to the 1980 Olympic Boycott initiated by President Carter. (JMK)

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The United States and Great Britain

Responses to the 1980 Boycott of the Olympic Games

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Paper prepared for presentation at the meetings of the American ~~Association~~ Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), Sport Sociology Section, March 28-31, 1984, Anaheim, California.

SP 024 289

The U.S. vs Great Britain

Responses to the 1980 Boycott of the Olympic Games

The Olympic Games, it is true, represent the most exhalted and the most visible sporting spectacle in the world. To be represented in the Olympics is every country's goal and to participate as a contestant is the ultimate athletic dream. Participation is viewed as a "coming of age" for that country and as "being the best" for the athlete. However, besides an athletic event, the Olympics represent a significant political and economic extravaganza. Every four years worldwide attention is drawn to athletic competition and to international intrigue associated with the quadrennial mixing of politics and sport. The 1980 Olympics were no different and the boycott provided a severe dramatization of the manner in which Olympic competition can be used as a pawn in the chess game of international politics.

While I was in London, England in the Fall of 1982, I decided to investigate the British reaction to the U.S. Boycott. This inquiry was motivated by my less than systematic, but not without foundation, notion that the role of sport in international relations and politics is not well defined. In fact, its role has probably been exaggerated by all except those involved in day-to-day, hard core diplomatic relations. The topic of sport and international politics is usually discussed in very specific terms, such as why visas should or should not be granted to athletes of certain countries. But where sport fits in a general theory of international relations is unclear. In addition, we usually discuss the topic in superpower terms, and this may be shortsighted or it may reflect the dominant tradition of "reality politics" which emphasizes power, the nation-state, and military prowess. I guess my question is: "Just where does sport fit in diplomatic relations?"

Once, while praparing a presentation for another conference, I asked the question of myself, "Does sport ever enter into actual over-the-table negotiations and foreign policy deliberations?" That is, when Kissinger met his Vietnam adversaries in Paris, did he remind them that we had won several gold medals in a recent Olympics and these victories should make them cognizant of our place and power in the world? In order to obtain some help in resolving my dilemma I reviewed the index of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy for references to sport. The former carried two articles the latter none. I then reviwed all of the articles on U.S.--U.S.S.R. relations and found nary a footnote reference to sport. These findings held through 1982 and 1983, the immediate years following the calamitous boycott. I could only condlude that when it came to serious diplomacy or "high politics" sport was irrelevant. I could also conclude the use of sport for ideological purposes represented Public Diplomacy or a mechanism of presenting a public account for the purposes of legitimation to an environment(s). These accounts, however, take a secondary status when a nation's survival is at stake.

A great deal of international relations takes the form of public diplomacy or the public presentation of a country's self. Cultural events, space explorations, education exchanges and sporting competition are examples of public diplomacy. Diplomacy is largely an exercise in trading and adjusting secondary national interests rather than negotiating vital national interests. The latter, which include defending territory and preventing domination, are those interests for which a country is willing to go to war to defend. All others, or secondary interests, are worth preserving but not going to war. Sport is a device by which we demonstrate our secondary interests, even if it

means conflict, (e.g., boycott or demonstrating allegiance, neither of which is too costly), but keeps the status quo in international relations. It is in this light that I interpret the British reaction to the U.S. Boycott of 1980.

Uses of Sport in International Relations

There have been several ways in which sport has been used as a mechanism of public diplomacy. First, the sporting arena provides a setting in which a country can define their aspirations for status or prestige among nations (Strenk, Lenk). Countries that are "on the make" internationally seek visibility, status and recognition in the international community via sport. These goals can be accomplished more quickly via sport than by means of traditional diplomatic avenues. East Germany, modern Russia, Cuba, China and many third-world or developing countries have taken this route. They hope that diplomatic and/or political recognition will follow the recognition that comes with participation and success in international sport. Sport success can assist in removing the inferiority complex a nation might feel.

Second, the nature of competition between countries reflects current diplomatic agreements. The case of South Africa illustrates this situation. If no diplomatic relations exist, then no sporting contact is possible. In this context sport can truly be a "war without weapons" where countries can act out their diplomatic and ideological hostilities without having to take up arms. Sport permits countries to "experiment with diplomatic relations" (e.g., "ping-ping diplomacy"). Relations can be tried out without too much diplomatic or political cost.

Third, the most familiar role of sport in the international scene is that of a political instrument for ideological expression or propagandizing.

Sport competition becomes a forum to demonstrate the physical, social, political or economic powers of one system over another. Ironically, the U.S. was the first to use early Olympics for these purposes. This orientation is the avowed motivation for the USSR's participation in international sport. Victories on the fields of competition are translated to political victory and the message is "go with a winner." Not only is there external propaganda value in success in international competition, but domestic propagandizing is also effective with athletic achievement. The citizens can also be reminded of the strength of the political or social system. The domestic stabilization function of international athletic success is, in fact, probably more important than is the external ideological function. This is particularly true for countries characterized by political instability and/or non-democratic political regimes.

Fourth, international sport is viwed as a way to further international understanding or peace. The safety valve function for sports suggests that if countries can work out their hostilities on the field they will be less likely to do so on the battleground. In addition, it is felt that the public association of athletes and officials enhances one country's understanding of another's culture and beliefs. Sport may not remove the potential of war, but can be a temporary substitute that delays hostility and "redefines" relations as peaceful. This tactic fulfills the principle of "Conservation of enemies"; it keeps adversaries at a reasonable level.

Fifth, contrary to the above, athletic competition can be a mechanism to demonstrate protest and conflict. The 1980 Boycott was used to dramatize our dissatisfaction with a Soviet strategy in Afghanistan. Thus, sport is used

to define ideological differences or boundaries. Thus, if a country cannot demonstrate victory or impact in "hard" diplomacy (e.g., demands for USSR to leave Afghanistan), it can earn some sense of triumph in the secondary areas such as sport. The latter enables the country to regroup pride or "face" after a loss or defeat in the international relations arena.

In conclusion, these uses of sport suggest several things. First, there is the assumption that the peoples of the world translate athletic victory into military and political strength. This, of course, remains to be demonstrated although anecdotal evidence (e.g., U.S. hockey victory in 1980) suggests support for this idea. Second, there is an assumption that international competition enhances international understanding. Again, this needs verification. Athletes rarely become diplomats; the media's portrayal of events and environment tends to represent official views and to superficially represent intrinsic cultural differences. Third, despite the frequency of athletic contests, cooperation is not the norm. In fact, there seems to be a direct correlation between the occurrence of international athletic competition and armed conflict. Sport thus demonstrates superiority not understanding. If the latter were the goal, then winners and losers would not be defined. As Seppanen states, sport is insufficient to its role as peace keeper and its ideology is insufficient to unify people much less countries (1982:). Part of the problem is that analysis of the role of sport in international relations has been largely functional with an emphasis on concensus. In reality, conflict is maintained rather than resolved via sport competition. Finally, sport is a factor in defining a country's status in the world, but it is not taken seriously by key diplomatic negotiators or

within significant negotiations. The value of sport materializes in negotiations affecting secondary interests. Sport is a representative yet peripheral forum in which to make political statements or to take ideological positions. The power of sport as a political tool rests in sport's general appeal or salience to the masses. (Kanin, 1981). Power over public opinion is viewed as very important in international affairs. Its role is truly one of a "conservation of enemies" or mollification of fueds." It is the latter which provides the basis for my interpretation of the British reaction to the 1980 boycott.

The Boycott: U.S. Position

On January 20, 1980, President Jimmy Carter wrote to Robert Kane, President of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) to urge that the USOC call on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to transfer, postpone, or cancel the 1980 Moscow Games if the Soviets did not withdraw troops from Afghanistan. In the same memo he noted that if these proposals were not adopted, the United States should not send a team. On February 12, 1980 the IOC stated that the Games will stay in Moscow and the USOC stated that it will abide by the President's decision. On February 20, Carter advised the USOC that he will move to prevent a team going to Moscow. (Presidential Papers:1980-1).

The politicalization of the Games as ideological propaganda and as a mechanism to express foreign policy were reflected in the Carter Administration's interpretation of the Olympic Games. A White House press release of April 13, 1980 clearly demonstrates this interpretation:

> "I don't claim that not going to the Summer Olympics will be the single factor that will result in a withdrawal of their troops, but I believe that going to the Soviet Union is, in effect, an endorsement of the invasion and an endorsement of the violation of morality, human decency, and international law.
>
> "The Soviets have, obviously, a great interest in the propaganda benefits to be derived for itself by an expression of participation with them in the Olympics in Moscow. Their own official publications and handbooks say that the granting to Moscow of a right to have the Summer Olympics is an endorsement, in effect, of the Soviet foreign policy and the recognition of the peaceful nature of the Soviet government." (Presidential Papers, 1980-81; p. 676).

The Federal government implemented additional sanctions such as grain and high-tech embargoes, but none drew the attention or the controversy that was associated with the boycott. In reality, the boycott was an expression of "face-saving" activity since the U.S. had not been able to militarily prevent the invasion (Nafziger, 1980).[1] As noted above, this is a common political manipulation of international sport. It also indicates how the Carter administration exaggerated the importance of the Olympics.

The administration's action on the boycott reflected Carter's desire to return America to the role of a significant moral force in the world. Carter wanted to go down in history as a "peacemaker" (Brzezinski 1983:15). Brzezinski states that one of Carter's foreign policy goals was:

> "...to enhance global sensitivity to human rights through actions designed to highlight United States observance of such rights and through multilateral and bilateral initiatives meant to influence other governments to give a higher priority to such human rights." (1983:55)

The Olympic boycott presented a fortuitous opportunity for the United States to flex its moralistic muscles and to declare the Soviet Union in vio-

lation of basic human rights (e.g., right to territorial perogative) and, thus, somehow immoral. With this action detente came to an end and Carter could regroup after his policy of "trusting" the Soviets had not produced favorable results.

All of this would have had some impact if, in fact, world leaders and even public opinion viewed the Olympics as representative of serious, vital interests. I do not feel anyone, save Carter administration officials, felt that the boycott would produce a withdrawal of Soviet troops. It was diplomatic window dressing designed to impact domestic public opinion and to ascertain where the United States stood on the heirarchy of world leadership. In other words, the boycott became an issue on which world alignment could be drawn. It was on this principle that the United States worked to gather support for the boycott, an effort at which it was only partially successful. The result demonstrated that the United States was not the world leader it had been, particularly among British and other European countries.

The British Reaction

Even though 58 countries boycotted the Games, virtually all of our European allies, including Great Britain participated. Few felt their medals were "tarnished" nor did the boycott reduce worldwide media interest. The Washington Post reported:

> "The lack of support for moving or boycotting the Games provides another example of the deep division among the NATO allies over how they should respond to the Afghanistan crisis. Only Canada and Great Britain have been ready to join... (1/22/80)

The fact that Britain was the only European country fully supportive of the boycott illustrated the long-standing difference between Britain and the rest of the Common Market (Palmer, 1982). Margaret Thatcher sought

concerted action but could not convince the European community to agree to boycott. Neither did other countries agree to cooperate in the implementation of other sanctions against the Soviets, particularly the discontinuance of trade with the USSR.

International public opinion for the boycott was mixed. In the United States, most supported the boycott, but 47 percent felt it would not be effective in getting the Soviets out of Afghanistan. Twelve percent of the Japanese supported the boycott; 53 percent of Australians were against it. West German citizens were evenly split, as were Israelites. In Canada, only 13 percent favored the boycott; three-fourths of the Swedes opted for participation.[2]

When the British public was asked about boycott participation they proved to be somewhat evenly divided on the issue. In January of 1980, 28 percent totally approved of the boycott while 30 percent totally disapproved. Thirty-two percent felt the boycott would not accomplish anything (Gallup Poll, 1979-1980:308). Later in March, the handling of the Olympic situation by Mrs. Thatcher drew the highest government disapproval rating after taxes and trade unions (International Public Opinion Index, 1980:125).

The British Government's position on the boycott was similar to that of the U.S.:

> "The government considers that the quality of the Russian action has made it impossible to dissociate attendance at the Olympic Games in Moscow from official approval of Soviet behaviour: for the Russians, the Olympic Games will be a major political event." (House of Commons: First Report, 1980:2)

Margaret Thatcher felt that participation would "condone international crime." (Parliamentary Papers, Vol. 979, 2/21/80). Support came from her Tory colleagues and various conservative groups and spokesmen.

However, the Parliament could only advise the British Olympic Authority (BOA) on what to do since the International Olympic Committee and its affiliate national bodies operate autonomously of government authority. The sport bodies, such as the Sports Council, resisted the government's attempts to use them as a pawn in a political chess game particularly when the government had more potentially detrimental action (e.g., grain embargo) at its disposal.[3]

> "What is the justification for allowing the Moscow branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank to continue its commercial operations, allowing the EEC to sell butter to the Russians and keeping an ambassador in Moscow while saying to the atheletes 'You cannot go'? Since President Carter has got what he wants in New Hampshire, is it not time to end this humbugging nonsense?" (Parliamentary Papers, Volume 979, February 27, 1980:1352)

Labour MP Peter Shaw wonders at the exaggerated importance of the games. He states:

> "When we last debated East-West relations and Afghanistan, on January 28, with so many issues of high policy left uncertain and unresolved at the end, I did not expect that the next occassion for a debate would be focused exclusively upon the issue of the Olympic Games. It shows an extraordinarily--and to many people outside of the House and outside Britain almost laughable--sense of proportion, apart from the fact that, in thrusting the issue forward ahead of other western responses of an economic and trading kind, the government has unnecessarily fed the suspicions and resentments of the community of sport that is being singled out and asked to make sacrifices that others have not yet been called upon to make." (Parliamentary Papers, Volume 981, March 17, 1980)

Thus, Sir Denis Follows of the BOC presented an affirmation to Parliament on March 4, 1980, that declared the BOC's intent to participate in the Games. Its justification was the broader issue of the separation of the Olympics from the specific influence of governments and the general pressures of politics. (Rule 24C of IOC Charter) (First Report: House of Commons, 1980). Later in March, the BOA defied Thatcher and

voted to go to Moscow. The British sport establishment viewed Mrs. Thatcher's request with distaste since they perceived themselves as guarding a public trust that guaranteed the separation of sport and politics (Kani , 1981). The Government might have understood this had it not continued its practice of not consulting the appropriate sport bodies when entering political agreements such as the Gleaneagles Agreement on Sport and Apartheid (Riordan, 1982).

Even with Mrs. Thatcher's banning of military personnel from competition and the withdrawal of the military attache to Moscow, the BOA would not change its position. Thatcher was also considering preventing BBC coverage of the Games and withholding travel visas from British civil servants who desired to go to Moscow. Despite a 315-147 House of Commons vote in favor of not participating and a threat by the Government to withhold financial support to the BOA via the National Sports Council, the BOA maintained its resolve.[4] In fact, on March 25, 1980 the BOA became the first West European Olympic committee to accept its Olympic invitation.

Nineteen of the twenty British sports federations were prepared to send teams to Moscow. The hockey and equestrain associations were hesitant.[5] Few believed that the boycott would change the Soviet behavior in Afghanistan. Thus, only a few NOC's felt any real pressure from their governments to withdraw from the Games (Economist, 3/29/80).

The British press suggested that the whole matter had been mishandled. Unity was never achieved and many felt political concerns rather than true altruism motivated the boycott action. The editors of the Economist,with reference to the USOC vote of April 14, 1980 to support the boycott stated:

> "First, public opinion polls and government attitudes in Western Europe and Japan suggested that unless America acted quickly and decisively, the whole movement to boycott the Moscow Olympics would fall apart. Second, the President's private polls told him that Americans wanted tougher policy initiatives from him on Iran and Afghanistan and that the Moscow boycott was supported by almost 70 percent of the electorate." (March 19, 1980:17)

> "The Committee (USOC) had become a pawn not only in American-Soviet relations, but also in the President's re-election campaign.
>
> It is partly to protect its right flank from Mr. Reagan's hawkish attacks that caused the White House to press so hard for a boycott." (p.18)

The Guardian stated:

> "For more than three months the argument (boycott debate) has been a misbegotten mess. An idea dreamed up by a few American sports writers, seized on by an American President who gives the distressing impression of making up foreign policy as he goes along; an idea of extreme political naivete and dismal immediate impact; an idea precisely calculated to produce the maximum Western disarray at a time when maximum western solidarity was needed." (April 14, 1980)

> "The boycott notion is a fiasco. It has detracted attention from Afghanistan and handed the Soviets a succession of propaganda coups and stressed painfully the split in an alliance of free and democratic people" (April 14, 1980)

CONCLUSION

One of the first and most significant outcomes of the boycott episode was the prominent intervention of western, democratic governments in sport administration. The long standing tradition of separation in both the United States and Britain was violated by President Carter's call for the boycott and Margaret Thatcher's pressure on the BOA to capitulate.

Separation was a viable position since it meant that the governments would not be financially responsible to the sport organizations (Riordan, 1982). Riordan (1982:156-7) quotes Sports Council Chair, Dick Jeeps:

> "This year under review (1980) will be remembered above all as the period when the governments of the western democracies became involved in the government of sport. Never again can it be said that sport can have a separate existence, independent of politics..."

In Carter's case, his administration's role in actively pressuring the USOC on the boycott represented an actualization of the President's Commission on Olympics report that advocated an enhanced role by government, particularly on the financial side. It is the case, however, that the Carter Administration's role detracted from, rather than supported, Olympic competition. In fact, the active role of the U.S. government may have represented a violation of both international and domestic laws which vest the authority over Olympic sport in the hands of the IOC and USOC respectively.

The boycott also demonstrated that this type of action tends to be counter productive. The projected benefits rarely, i reality, exceed the costs (Nafziger, 1980). Some might state that Carter's boycott action cost him the next election. The boycott did not have any effect on the Soviet Union other than perhaps to provide the Soviets with even more political propaganda than they might otherwise have had at their disposal. Boycotts might work on poorer, defenseless countries, but have little effect on the major powers (Nafziger, 1980:73). The sociology of conflict will tell us that adversarial strategies harden rather than ease territorial or ideological differences. Such was the case in 1980. Detente was no

longer existent, therefore the Soviets had no reason to listen with any sympathy to western criticism. Finally, such actions are more productive if the goal of the action is clear. The intended outcome was never really clear to the European community or other allies. A considerable amount of energy was consumed and perhaps wasted on a major event of public diplomacy, but a minor event in world politics.

Finally, despite the fact that Britain supported the boycott, its motivation was one of maintaining an old, but deteriorating, political alliance rather than any feeling about the intrinsic nature of international sport. Even with the U.S. backing, Britain could not persuade the Commonwealth or members of the European community to support the boycott. I think this is a reflection of the changing and fluid nature of political and economic alliances. The world is no longer divided into a dualistic sphere of influence with western democracy on the one side and communist totalitarianism on the other. To conceptualize the world into superpower terms is a mistake. The boycott issue clearly reflected this orientation. Without consultation with allies, and in the name of national security, Carter called for the boycott. This strategy represented American arrogance in foreign affairs and domestic subterfuge in public opinion. Few believed that national security was threatened or that a boycott would drive the Soviets from Afghanistan.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]A similar point was made by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his memiors of his role as Carter's National Security Advisor. Carter also needed to recover from the fall of the Shah of Iran, an event which did considerable damage to Carter's international reputation.

Gallup poll results also showed President Carter losing ground in the public's evaluation of his performance. In January to March, 1980, 55 percent of the population approved and approximately 37 percent disapproved of the manner in which Carter was handling his job. All through the months of boycott rhetoric, Carter's popularity held up. Thus, his assertiveness during this time may have halted the trend of lowered ratings. However, during the months of the implementation of the boycott--June, July, and August--the approval of Carter's performance plummeted to the lowest levels in history (21 percent). Carter's domestic strategy backfired. Instead of ultimately realizing support, he actually lost ground with the American public. When we saw the Games were going on and we were not there, we realized that the boycott was detrimental to country and athlete.

Their polls also showed a growing disenchantment with the manner in which Carter was handling the Iranian situation. In December, 1979, 76 percent approved the Carter policy; but, in June of 1980, 42 percent approved. (The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1980)

[2]The source of these statistics is the Index of International Public Opinion, 1979-1980. Prepared by Survey Research Consultants International, Inc.

[3]It should also be noted that the sport governing organization resisted the boycott because they feared losing influence in the governance of their respective international organizations. Thus, motives of self-interest prevailed throughout much of the discourse.

[4]In 1972 the Sports Council was established by Royal Charter with the task of coordinating sport in Britain. It is entirely dependent upon the government for its financial life. The Sports Council would offer financial assistance to the BOA only if the latter needed to be bailed out at the last minute. Naturally, the Sports Council supported the Government's position.

[5]Eventually the equestrain group decided not to attend the Games. This saved the British from a potentially embarrassing incident since Prince Philip is the President of the British Equestrian Association.